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ABSTRACT

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SINGLE PARENTS AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT --

A NATIONAL TRAGEDY

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Can single parenthood adversely affect children's school achievement? A recent study conducted in the secondary schools of a rural Washington State school district dramatically confirms that it does. Grade level by grade level, and subject by subject, the children of single parents consistently performed less well than children coming from two-parent homes.

What do these findings imply in terms of future public school programs? As single-parent families increase, the public schools will be asked to respond in creative ways to meet the needs of students from these homes, and to meet the needs of their parents. The findings of this Eastern Washington University research project are so clear-cut as to suggest that the time has

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come for teaching and administrative strategies targeted directly to the children of single parents.

* * *

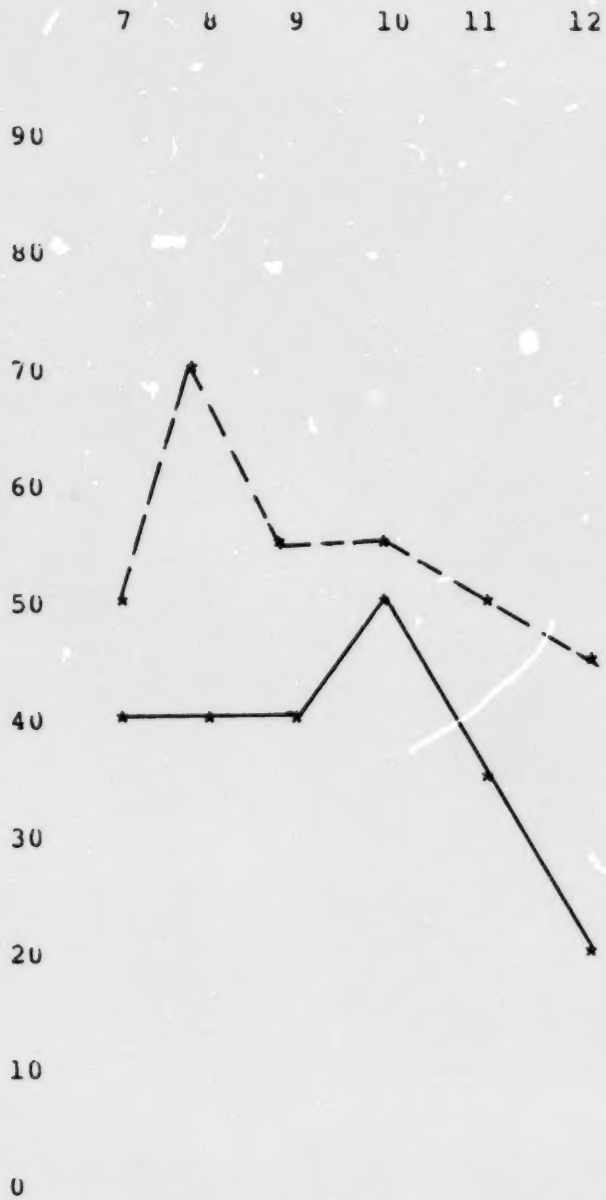
Since 1960, single parent families in the United States have increased by 225 percent, and it is estimated that by 1990 half of all children will spend at least some time in a single-parent home. Today, approximately 19 percent of children under age 18 are living with one parent. Half of all black children live in one-parent families.

Most of these single-parent families are created by divorce or separation, although increasing numbers of unwed mothers are now keeping and raising their babies. Ninety percent of all single-parent families are headed by females.

Several factors associated with single parent families have also been identified by researchers as having adverse effects on school achievement. These include:

Poverty is a leading cause of anxiety, poor physical health, absenteeism and a lowered quality of life. Estimates vary widely, but 50 to 90 percent of all single-parent homes headed by females are believed to fall below the poverty line.

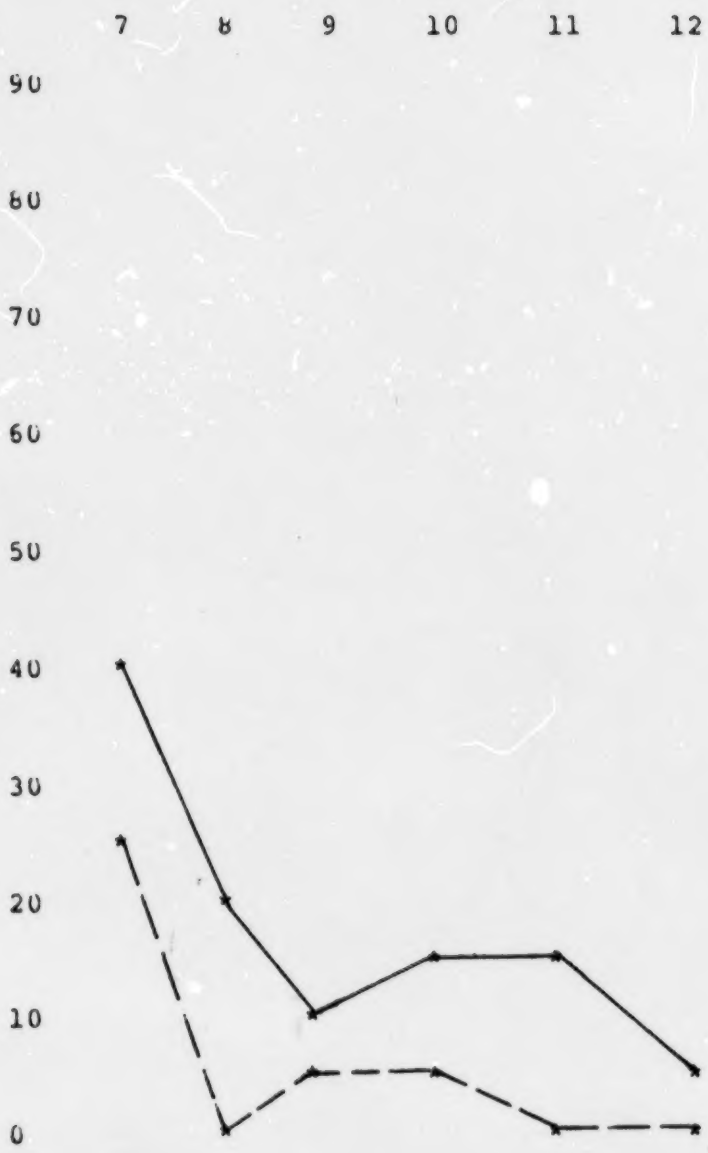
Emotional stress can retard or reverse a child's academic progress, and is a factor especially evident in young children experiencing the divorce or separation of their parents. Studies by Kelly and Wallerstein identified such emotional signs as restlessness, lack of concentration, sadness, depression, loss of



PERCENTAGES OF STUDENTS, GRADES 7 - 12, CLASSED AS "HIGH ACHIEVERS" BY GRADE POINT AVERAGE

--- = Two-parent children

—— = Single - parent children



PERCENTAGES OF STUDENTS, GRADES 7 - 12, CLASSED AS "LOW ACHIEVERS" BY GRADE POINT AVERAGES

--- = two-parent children

—— = one-parent children

friends and insubordination. Teachers also identified increased day-dreaming and lowered self-esteem in approximately half of the children whose parents were experiencing divorce or separation. These signs were not as evident in secondary students undergoing a family divorce. Older students, according to Wallerstein's study, do not experience a decline in grades or academic achievement during a divorce.

A child's sex plays a major role in school adjustment. Boys are markedly more vulnerable to the emotional stresses of divorce than are girls. These findings may reflect the fact that most divorces entail a physical or psychological separation from the father, or they may indicate the changing roles of mothers following divorce. Studies show that mothers often adopt more severe disciplinary methods with boys after a divorce than they employed before the divorce. These findings also have implications for single unwed mothers who are raising boys.

Discrimination against or stereotyping of single-parent families may play a part in poor school performance. Clay, for example, polled 1200 single parents across the country concerning their own experiences with their children's schools. He reported that over one-third of them had heard negative comments about one-parent families, and almost half reported terms such as "broken home" or other stereotypical language. Research regarding teacher expectations and student achievement confirms that low expectations often produce poor student performance.

Parental involvement, or a lack of involvement, in school or children's activities may play a more significant role than once believed. A recent High School and Beyond study showed a direct correlation between parental involvement and school performance, with 88 percent of "A" students, 81 percent of "B" students, 72 percent of "C" students and 61 percent of "D" students reporting a high degree of parental supervision. Working hours, emotional crises, a sense of discrimination and school schedules which sometime exclude both single and married working parents may combine to limit the single parent's involvement in a child's academic progress or school activities.

* * *

Whatever the factors impacting the single parent, the consequences of single-parenthood on the school achievement of children are primarily negative. This conclusion has been reached by numerous studies. To give just one example from a large body of research, in 1980 the National Association of Elementary School Principals surveyed 26 American schools and discovered that 38 percent of the elementary students from one-parent families received grades of D or F. Only 23 percent of the children from two-parent homes received similar low grades.

The same study found that 17 percent of the single-parent children earned A's or B's, while 30 percent of the two-parent children earned top grades. These studies are dramatically confirmed by our own research in a rural Washington State School district.

At the request of the junior-senior high school principal, the Eastern Washington University Department of Education surveyed 201 (out of 206) students, grades 7 through 12, in the district.

The significant characteristic of this school population is its homogenous nature, being composed primarily of white, middle-income students. Economic, racial, ethnic and cultural factors are almost constant, with only a few Oriental and Mexican-American students included in the survey.

Of the 201 students, thirty-seven were identified as coming from single-parent homes and 158 were identified as two-parent students. No attempts were made to identify students now living with stepfathers or stepmothers following a prior divorce situation.

Two methods were used to survey the students. The California Achievement Tests, Reading Comprehension, Language and Math, were administered to 201 students (the remainder being absent). The grade point averages of all students were collected and compared.

The findings regarding grade-point averages provided the clearest comparison between single-parent and two-parent students. In every grade but one (the recently graduated senior class) two-parent students outranked their single-parent counterparts. When students were classed as "high," "medium" or "low" achievers by grade point, two-parent students ranked higher in <u>every</u> instance.

Although percentage differences were not as dramatic with the California Achievement Test results, they consistently confirmed the grade point average findings. In Reading, Language and Math, a higher percentage of two-parent students scored at or above grade level than single-parent students in every instance. In addition, students from single-parent homes consistently scored lower in math than they did in verbal skills.

The mean grade point average for students from single parent homes was 1.95, while students from two-parent homes had a mean grade point average of 2.37.

* * *

This research, set in the context of on-going national studies, clearly indicates that the children of single parents need help in order to gain equal school achievement with their two-parent counterparts. The homogenous nature of this survey, conducted in a relatively isolated rural community with little diversity in economic, racial or cultural factors, clearly points out that single parenthood itself may be the deciding factor in school success for many students.

Public schools are beginning t6o accommodate the needs of working parents by scheduling evening meetings and student presentations, or by providing child-care during school functions. Federal and state agencies help to support those children in low-income families through reduced-price lunches or special "compensatory" programs. Counseling may be available to children who are emotionally disturbed.

But all of these measures are like bits and pieces of a larger puzzle. Very little is being done through our public schools specifically for single parents and their children, no matter what their economic level, work situation or emotional status may be.

Now is the time for the education community to ask itself whether students who come from single-parent families experience problems unique to the single-parent household and, if so, how the public schools can begin to address the needs associated with those problems. Patch-work solutions -- based on the contributing factors listed earlier in this report -- do not appear to be working. We create a national tragedy if we do not fit the pieces of our puzzle together into a coherent approach to the problems and needs of single-parent students.

As a point of departure, this group suggests that educators begin to grapple with an operational definition for the term "single-parent family." Although it appears to be self-explanatory, the term has been used with various shades of meaning by the popular press. An operational definition should help to identify the salient characteristics of the single parent family, and might be helpfully applied to apparently traditional relationships, such as military families, where one parent is frequently absent from the home. In addition, an operational definition would help educators see past the culturally triggered stereotypes concerning poverty (or wealth), sex, disciplinary methods, or emotional disturbance.

Second, this group suggests that educators study single-parent families in which children have demonstrated school and social success. How do single parents (Geraldine Ferraro's mother, as a familiar example) provide their children with a background for achievement? Although models exist, they are primarily anecdotal ones. Parental involvement should be an essential component of this research.

Last, this group suggests that educators begin testing academic and counseling methods designed specifically to improve the scholastic achievement of children who come from single-parent homes. Raising educators' awareness about possible discrimination and stereotyping of single-parent children by the community would be an important part of this step. So, too, would be raising the educators' awareness of self-stereotyping by the single-parent child, and of the child's susceptibility to using his/her status as a "victim of divorce" ("Illegitimacy," "death," etc.) as an excuse for social and academic indifference.

By the year 2000, more than 50 percent of America's children may live in single-parent families. Ignoring the impact of single-parenthood on school performance, or compartmentalizing solutions through a series of unrelated school agencies, will not meet the real needs of children from these families. Without an urgent effort by educators to identify and overcome the negative effects of single-parent families, a generation of children seems destined to achieve significantly less than they are capable of achieving. Educators should and must help to avert this national tragedy.

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